



The Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies
de L'Institut Canadien D'Études Stratégiques

Women and Radical Islamic Terrorism: Planners, perpetrators, patrons?

Jessica Davis
Strategic Datalink #136
May, 2006

Introduction

Five years after the attacks of 9/11, a significant body of research has emerged on radical Islam and terrorism. However, there are some elements of the current 'jihad' that are not well understood, resulting in gaps in counter-terrorism strategies. One of the most neglected questions in the current literature is the role of women in radical Islam. While the terrorists of 9/11 were all male members of al-Qaeda, it is not necessarily the case that women are excluded from jihad, or that they play merely a passive role. According to author and former CIA agent Marc Sageman, women are often the more radicalized element of a society.¹ Nevertheless, media portrayals of radical activities tend to focus on male terrorists and treat female participants as the exception rather than the rule - particularly in relation to the global jihad.

This essay will address the role of women in radical Islamic terrorist organizations, and whether or not media portrayals of women as relatively uninvolved parties are accurate.

In approaching this question, a review was conducted of the information on women, terrorism, and radical Islam. This review called forth a number of assumptions and stereotypes, resulting in three hypotheses:

a) Women facilitate men's entrance into radical Islamic terrorist organizations.

b) Women are becoming increasingly active in radical Islamic terrorism.

c) Women will continue to be involved because of their strategic and tactical value as terrorists.

This paper will explore these hypotheses and attempt to determine their validity. To accomplish this, a dataset of terrorist incidents involving women was created. Any data involving terrorism and women (all organizations) was accumulated to form a baseline for comparison between radical Islam and other forms of terrorism. This dataset is not yet exhaustive, and therefore the findings of this paper must be approached cautiously. After examining the dataset, some preliminary trends were extrapolated in conjunction with the literature review.

Views of Women and Terrorism

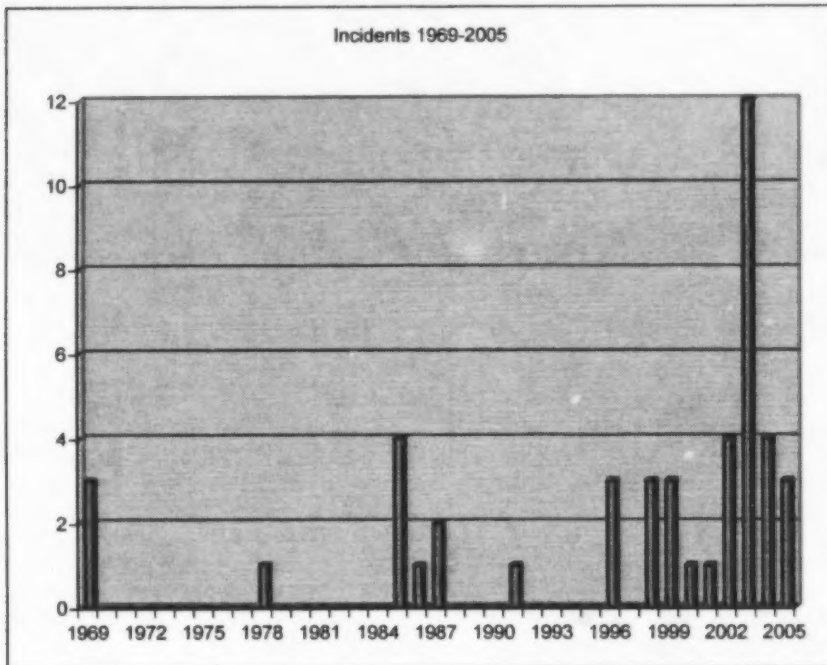
Traditionally, women have been perceived as victims of violence rather than as the perpetrators of it. Indeed, a cursory review of the current literature on terrorism would lead one to believe that female terrorists are an anomaly. But since 1985 roughly 34 per cent of terrorist attacks have been perpetrated by women,² with women filling operational roles in nearly all insurgencies. Women have been among the leaders and chief ideologues of terrorist organizations, such as the Weather Underground, Italy's Red Brigade and Germany's Red Army Faction.³ The role of women in left-wing or secular terrorist organizations has been more pronounced in history, largely due to the conservative nature of right-wing or religious terrorist movements, which often exclude women from their ranks, viewing them as weaker

members of society.

The usual interpretation, including the interpretation that persists in Western literature and defence studies, is that women are not allowed to fight in jihad,⁴ and their emergence as terrorists is something new, alarming and unprecedented. However, several noted scholars have questioned this assumption. It is true that radical Islamic terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and others linked to the global jihad were slow to begin incorporating women into their ranks. Initially, Islamic clerics opposed women's involvement in jihad, and only a handful of the more progressive clerics acknowledged that women could participate.⁵ Today, women's role in religious terrorism is growing; female terrorists have staged attacks in Israel, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Chechnya. The female arm of radical Islamic terrorism has even been named, the *Mujaidaat*.⁶ However, not every terrorist organization has welcomed women into its ranks. Notably, some Palestinian groups continue to be hesitant in incorporating women.⁷

In August of 2001, the Saudi high council officially authorized women to participate in terrorist attacks in the name of the jihad. In February of 2002, Hamas' spiritual leader, Sheikh Yassin, condoned the employment of women as suicide bombers. In January of 2004, Reem Raiyshi became the first woman to carry out a suicide bombing on behalf of Hamas. The latter recently revealed that dozens of women in the Gaza Strip have joined its armed wing, *Izzaddin Kassam*, and are preparing to carry out attacks on Israel.⁹

In early 2003, the Palestinian Islamic Ji-



Terrorist incidents from 1969-2005 that involved women.

Notice the marked increase since 1999, roughly around the beginning of the second intifada.

had (PIJ) announced a shift towards a more liberal view of women participating in terrorist activities. The PIJ announced that it would accept the legitimacy of female suicide bombers largely in an effort to upgrade the operational capabilities of the organization.¹⁰ Shortly thereafter, an online propaganda and recruiting campaign was launched, with efforts focused at universities.¹¹ In May of 2004, a leading Egyptian cleric, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Dean of Islamic Studies at the University of Qatar, issued a *fatwa* (religious decree) in response to the female suicide bombing in Afula. He stated that "the act is a form of martyrdom for the cause of Allah [and that a woman] should go out for jihad even without the permission of [her] husband..."¹²

In August of 2004, the online magazine *Al Khansaa* issued a call for women to participate in jihad in a variety of ways, reflecting the evolving duality of women's role in the armed struggle. While the magazine emphasized that a woman was first and foremost a mother, wife, sister and daughter, in society she is an educator, propagator, preacher of Islam, and a female jihadi warrior. Accordingly, she also has a responsibility to defend society from degradation and must provide logistical support to the male jihadi warrior.¹³ While this declaration was not exactly a clarion call for women to become actively en-

gaged in the armed struggle, it certainly laid the foundation for further discussion of the matter, and has served as potential justification for women joining in jihad.

Palestinian women have also become more involved in the struggle since the outbreak of the second *intifada* (uprising) against Israel. They participate in demonstrations, take part in popular committees, and have been portrayed as heroines sending their sons to participate in the jihad. The Palestinian Authority (PA) has repeatedly targeted women in recruiting campaigns, and has lauded their participation in suicide terrorism. Wafa Idris' successful suicide attack was glorified by several Arab newspapers and was used as an example of how a devout woman should behave, particularly if she is unmarried.¹⁴ The PA is even rumoured to have created a brigade for women terrorists in Wafa Idris' honour.¹⁵

The evidence may suggest a shift in Islam towards allowing women to participate, but this should not be mistaken as a fundamental shift in attitudes towards women in radical Islam. It does not herald the liberation of women, but rather the exploitation of women. There is no evidence that female terrorists will replace the male hierarchy or have contact with senior leaders, except to execute an attack.¹⁶ Indeed, while female suicide bombers are elevated

to the status of heroines, there remains no change in how women are viewed in Islamic society as a whole. Thus the emergence of female terrorists should not be construed as the emancipation of women - at least not in the Western sense of the word.¹⁷

The question of why women become terrorists often elicits a varied response. Revenge is a popular explanation for why women commit acts of terrorism. Others suggest that women commit terrorist acts because of rape or abuse (often by occupying soldiers, thus their need for revenge). Women may also crave the support of men, harbour a desire to defend their faith, or to express their religious zeal.¹⁸ Some may have been sexually 'dishonoured', and as such are no longer considered suitable for marriage. In some Islamic societies they must be executed if their family is to regain its honour.¹⁹ Thus by offering to sacrifice themselves in a political cause they would be taking the only route to salvation while relieving the burden on their families.

While these are partial motivators for participation in suicide bombings, they are incomplete explanations. For women, contextual pressures, domestic or international, and social dislocation and political pressure all facilitate extreme behaviour. Groups seeking to broaden their membership to include women can exploit these pressures.²⁰ While these are all possible explanations, more emphasis is often given to 'emotional' factors than to political or religious zeal. By contrast, men's motivations are often assumed to be political or religious, and few question whether or not there is a family connection or social motivation to men's desire to commit terrorist acts. Some authors claim that women in Islamic society are abducted and forced to become terrorists,²¹ but there is little evidence to support this claim. In fact, little is truly known about the motivations of the female terrorist - particularly ones involved in suicide attacks - because they rarely leave behind detailed accounts of their lives.

Hypothesis A: Women facilitate the entrance of men into radical Islamic terrorist organizations

Some authors have suggested that women facilitate the development of terrorists by raising them in a revolutionary environment. Over 60 per cent of terrorists have some secondary education,²² which casts

doubt on the notion that mothers are primarily responsible for nurturing a mindset based on radical interpretations of Islam. Marc Sageman addresses this assumption in detail in his work on terrorist networks. He argues that there is no terrorist personality *per se*. Further, there is inconclusive evidence as to whether faith as a child truly influences an individual to become involved in terrorist organizations.²³ Sageman's work suggests that most terrorists experienced a shift towards radical Islam as adults,²⁴ therefore negating the developmental influence of the mother. But in Palestine, which hosts a very different form of radical Islamic terrorism, the women play a more influential role in fostering a terrorist environment because of the generational nature of the conflict.

Sageman suggests that women do play an influential role in encouraging men to harbour radical interpretations of Islam through the social network theory. When men marry women who are linked to the global jihad or are very devout and followers of radical Islam, they can become introduced to social networks that may be involved in the jihad. In many cases, in-laws provide the links for joining the jihad.²⁵ Sageman's work on the social network form of recruiting provides insight into the role that women play in the home. The women can facilitate the radical interpretation of Islam, and can encourage the men to become involved in the jihad. As such, the woman's role is not necessarily one of a perpetrator, but rather a facilitator.

Either way, she helps to foster the growth of the movement.

Although the media often portrays women as facilitating the development of (male) terrorists from childhood, this is connection is tenuous - particularly in the case of radical Islamic terrorist networks such as al-Qaeda. However, the role of women in using networks to influence adult males to take up jihad should not be underestimated - especially when formulating counter-terrorism policies.

Hypothesis B: Women are becoming increasingly active in radical Islamic terrorism

A wide variety of groups utilize women as terrorists and as suicide bombers. For example, of the 21 suicide attacks carried out by the Kurdish PKK group in Turkey, 14 were carried out by women.²⁶ The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka is credited with up to 200 suicide bombings, with women accounting for approximately 30-40 per cent of these.²⁷ By most accounts there are growing numbers of women participating in acts grounded in an explosive mixture of nationalism and radical Islam. Some Palestinian and Chechen militants fit this profile.²⁸ Indeed, the infamous siege of a Moscow theatre in October of 2002 included several female extremists (known as 'Black Widows') who donned explosive belts and expressed their willingness to die in order to secure a Russian withdrawal from Chechnya, or at least to avenge the killing of loved ones by Russian security forces.

Hypothesis C: Women will continue to be involved because of their strategic and tactical value as terrorists

The infrequency of women participating in terrorism is largely due to the constraints placed on them by society and the acceptable expectations of their behaviour. In fact, given the hurdles of social and gender expectation, women are often more committed to the cause than their male counterparts.²⁹ Still, women's role in terrorism has increased largely because they enjoy a tactical and strategic advantage based on gender and cultural clichés.³⁰

Women are typically viewed as non-threatening. This perception has fostered sensitivities regarding more thorough body-searches of women at check-points or public gatherings, and has led to the

use of pregnancy to create the impression of innocence while concealing explosives.³¹ An excellent example of this was Muriel Degauque, a Belgian woman who blew herself up in Iraq on 9 November, 2005, marking the first time that a Western woman was successfully recruited for a suicide attack.³² Even in societies that have experienced repeated attacks by women (i.e. Israel) there is still a tendency to view and treat women differently than men.³³

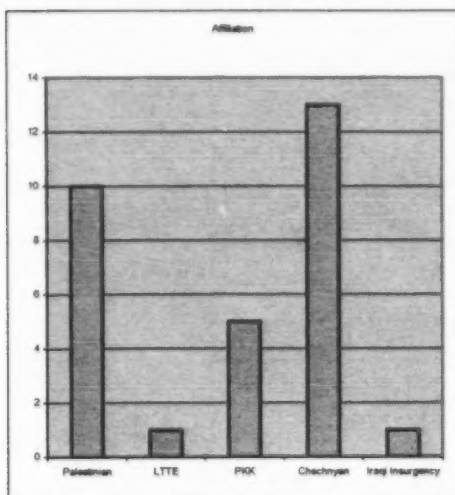
Women are generally able to gain access where men have greater difficulty, often because the target audience has made assumptions about women being incapable of perpetrating terrorist attacks. The very invisibility of women that is fostered by extreme interpretations of Islam, and criticized by the West, paradoxically makes women excellent perpetrators.³⁴ Invisibility, both within Islamic society and as perceived by the West, lulls observers into the belief that women are insignificant actors within terrorist organizations.³⁵ This lack of understanding of conservative Islamic culture has led to bad policies surrounding the treatment of women as potential suspects. What counter-terrorism strategies require is a concerted effort to include women in all aspects of the plan.

Aside from the tactical advantages garnered by employing women as terrorists, there are also strategic advantages. Attacks by women garner significantly more attention at home and abroad. They are viewed as a rarity, and an act of desperation by a group, and can often bring greater attention to the group's cause. Female terrorists also generate more sympathy, and their actions often promote awareness of their family situation and the motivations which led them to act as they did. In patriarchal societies, women acting as terrorists can serve to shame men into joining the cause.³⁶

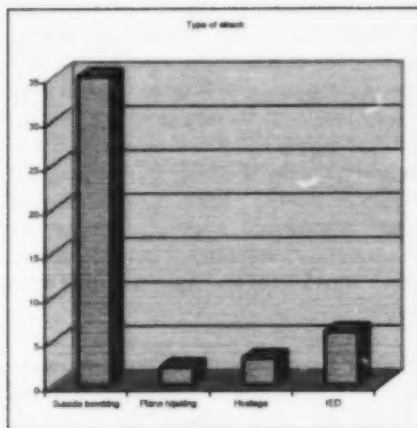
The future

Despite the limitations of this study and the admittedly limited body of research on the topic, some findings point to trends in the future of women in terrorism.

An underestimated threat to Canada and the West is any potential shift in al-Qaeda's policy towards employing women as terrorists. The West is ill-prepared to deal with this eventuality, as our perception of women in Islam is one of subjugation and disenfranchisement. However,



Affiliation. The number of women (y axis) involved in terrorist incidents by group of affiliation. By far, women were employed in Chechen-affiliated terrorist organizations. However, the Palestinian cause has long been employing women as well.



Women are overwhelmingly used to perpetrate suicide bombings, likely because of cultural sensitivities surrounding the searching of women.

there is an apparent shift in al-Qaeda's philosophy towards women. The evidence suggests that al-Qaeda is attempting to adapt to these policies and may be employing more unconventional means to attack its enemies, including using women as terrorists.

Prior to his death, a Saudi al-Qaeda leader penned a volume supportive of the idea of women in jihad, but did not go as far as to call for women's full participation.³⁷ In March of 2003, *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* published an interview with a woman claiming to be the head of a female cell of al-Qaeda, with squads of women involved in the struggle of Afghan, Arab and Chechen nationality.³⁸ In August of 2004, al-Qaeda inaugurated a special website calling on women to encourage men to become suicide bombers. Not long after, the first woman associated with al-Qaeda and the global jihad blew herself up in Iraq.³⁹

In March of 2003, the FBI expressed concerns over the possibility of al-Qaeda's changing *modus operandi* following reports of increased recruitment of women. A unit was reportedly formed around a female leader known as Umm Usama. She is believed to be in close contact with al-Qaeda and making extensive use of the Internet to communicate with her network.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, Pakistani police have become increasingly alarmed at reports that al-Qaeda-linked cells intend to deploy female

suicide bombers against the government.⁴¹ A Pakistani woman was recently suspected to have crept inside the US to perpetrate another terror attack.⁴² Another hint of women's greater involvement in al-Qaeda dates back to March 2003, when a female Pakistani neurological expert, Aafia Siddiqui, was sought by the FBI for her alleged links to the terror group. This marked the first time in the aftermath of 9/11 that a warrant for a woman had been issued in the 'Global War on Terror'.⁴³

Clearly, Al-Qaeda is experimenting with deploying women as terrorists. Since this is now the case, Western countries must re-examine their understanding of women's traditional role in Islam. In order to fashion a truly effective counter-terrorist policy, intelligence services would benefit from a greater understanding of the gaps between stereotypical female terrorist activity and the reality of gender roles in terrorist organizations.⁴⁴

Women need to be regarded as potential perpetrators and counter-terrorist policy should treat them as such. Women can also be rich sources of information about terror cells due to their role in fostering extended family networks. As such, women need to be cultivated as human intelligence assets. Indeed, all aspects of counter-terrorism strategies and policies should be approached from a gendered perspective, addressing root causes, understanding what would motivate women to commit terrorist acts, and to prevent them from becoming involved in the struggle or carrying out an act of terror.

Conclusion

Our own gender biases can create bad policy and security decisions, and our social relativism can also hinder the application of effective counter-terrorism strategies. As Clara Beyler of the Institute for Counter Terrorism said:

Women have channelled the frustration imposed by their roles in society into a criminal behaviour. Within the terrorist infrastructure, they think they can exploit their dynamic not as women, but as human beings. This is where their mistake lies: they will always be

defined by their gender, and will be used because of what society perceives as a more gentle and innocent appearance rather than an intrinsic quality.⁴⁵

It is this very perception that poses the greatest threat to our society in our fight against radical Islamic terrorism.

Notes:

¹ Sageman, Marc. Presentation at the Royal Military College of Canada, Fall 2004.

² Bloom, Mia. *Terror's Stealth Weapon: Women*. In *The LA Times*. <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-bloom29nov29.0.3416302.story?coll=la-news-comment-opinions>. 29 November 2005.

³ Nacos, Brigitte L. *The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media: Similar Framing Patterns in the News Coverage of Women in Politics and in Terrorism*. In *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. Vol 28 pp 435-451, 2005. p 436.

⁴ *Ibid.* p 375.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Ali, Farhana. *The Bomber Behind the Veil*. In *The Baltimore Sun*. December 13, 2005.

⁷ Bloom, Mia. *Mother, Daughter, Sister, Bomber*. pp 54-62.

⁸ Beyler, Clara. *Female Suicide Bombers: An Update*. http://www.icst.org/articles/staff_articles_frame.htm. Accessed 14 March 2006. Written March 7th, 2004.

⁹ Hamas Recruits Women Terrorists and Plans New Training Site in Destroyed Jewish Towns. In *Militant Islam Monitor.org*. September 8, 2005.

¹⁰ Beyler, Clara.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Beyler, Clara.

¹³ Bloom, Mia. *Mother, Daughter, Sister, Bomber*. pp 54-62.

¹⁴ Israeli, Raphael. *Palestinian Women: The Quest for a Voice in the Public Square Through "Islamic Martyrdom"*. In *Terrorism and Political Violence*. Vol 16 No 1. Spring 2004. pp 66-96 p 71.

¹⁵ Israeli, Raphael. p 89.

¹⁶ Marcus, Itamar.

¹⁷ Ali, Farhana.

¹⁸ Israeli, Raphael. p 67.

¹⁹ Bloom, Mia. *Mother, Daughter, Sister, Bomber*. pp 54-62.

²⁰ Bloom, Mia. 29 November 2005.

²¹ Cunningham, Karla J. *Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism*. In *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. Vol 26 pp 171-195. 2003. p 172.

²² Hoogensen, Gunhild. p 133.

²³ *Ibid.* p 75.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p 77.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p 93.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p 113.

²⁷ Beyler, Clara.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Cook, David. p 376.

³⁰ Nacos, Brigitte L. p 435.

³¹ *Ibid.* p 134.

³² Nacos, Brigitte L. p 446.

³³ Ali, Farhana.

³⁴ Nacos, Brigitte L. p 447.

³⁵ Ali, Farhana.

³⁶ Cunningham, Karla J. *Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism*. In *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. Vol 26 pp 171-195. 2003. p 173.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Cook, David. pp 381-382.

³⁹ Bloom, Mia. pp 54-62.

⁴⁰ Bloom, Mia. 29 November 2005.

⁴¹ Beyler, Clara.

⁴² Hussain, Zahid & Jay Solomon. *Al Qaeda's Changing Face*. In *East Eastern Economic Review*. August 26, 2004. Vol 167 no. 34.

⁴³ Beyler, Clara.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Nacos, Brigitte L. p 436.

⁴⁶ Beyler, Clara.

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the CISS or its members.

Copyright 2006

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part. Kindly credit the CISS.

About the CISS

The Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies meets a need for a body of information on Canadian security issues and promotes public awareness of the significance of national and international developments. The CISS provides a forum for discussion of strategic matters, and through its educational and informational activities seeks to improve the basis for informed choice by the Canadian public and its leaders.